DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 298 PS 015 930

AUTHOR Vaughn, Sharon; Brett, Arleen
TITLE Teaching Interpersonal Problem Solving to Preschoolers: A Piece of the Social Competence Puzzle.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Interpersonal Competence; *Intervention; Models; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Problem Solving; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on interpersonal problem solving as a way of enhancing the social competence of young children. While many children acquire strategies for interacting positively with others and need no specific intervention, some children have difficulty in acquiring or displaying successful interpersonal problem solving skills. When children have only one way of interacting, they lack the flexibility needed to adjust successfully to novel social situations. As the child's range of strategies for successfully interacting with others increases so does the likelihood for interpersonal success. The purpose of many interpersonal problem solving training programs is to increase the child's effectiveness in dealing successfully with others across a range of situations. In this paper,several training programs are reviewed and Ridley and Vaughn's (1982) model for teaching interpersonal problem solving skills is discussed. The model has seven components, each of which is briefly described: goal identification, cue sensitivity, empathy, alternative thinking, consequential thinking, procedural thinking, and integration. In conclusion, evaluating the efficacy of teaching interpersonal problem solving to young children is discussed and the need for further research is pointed out. (Author/RH)

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Teaching Interpersonal Problem Solving to Preschoolers:

A piece of the social competence puzzle

by

Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D.
and
Arleen Brett, Ed.D.
University of Miami
Coral Gables, Florida

PS 015930

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Teaching Interpersonal Problem Solving to Preschoolers: A piece of the social competence puzzle.

Abstract

This article focuses on interpersonal problem solving as a way of enhancing social competence of young children. While many children acquire strategies for interacting positively with others without specific intervention, some children have difficulty in acquiring or displaying successful interpersonal problem solving skills. A review of programs designed to teach interpersonal problem solving skills to young children is discussed and a model for teaching interpersonal problem solving skills is presented.

Teaching Interpersonal Problem Solving to Preschoolers: A Piece of the Social Competence Puzzle

Matt (4 years old): "Can I play?"

Josh (4 years old): "No, there's already too many."

Matt: "But I can make this bigger." (Points to block structure.)

Josh: "OK, then make it bigger, go ahead, but that's it. No more people after this. It's closed!"

Children attempting to negotiate even the most routine day are involved in a myriad of situations requiring some level of interpersonal problem solving from finding playmates to convincing other children to let them play with their blocks. Successful interpersonal problem solving is critical for problem resolution, making and maintaining friends, achieving harmony in school and home, and developing positive perceptions of self and others. This article discusses interpersonal problem solving and how it facilitates social competence. A program that teaches interpersonal problem solving to young children is described.

Prior to preschool a child's social interactions occur with a limited number of persons, most frequently the immediate family and those responsible for child care. These "significant others" learn to read and respond to the child's cues and assist the child in resolving difficulties. As children become mobile and better able to care for themselves, their social world expands to include a more complicated network of interpersonal interactions with adults and peers in a variety

of roles and settings (Guralnick, 1981; Hartup, 1979; Maccoby, 1980; Parke, 1979). With an increased frequency and range of interactions, children are no longer passive recipients of adult social problem solving, but are required to be actively involved in negotiating their own social problems (Borman, 1982; Parke, 1979). Thus, children need to acquire independent problem solving skills at a young age.

The frequency and complexity of social interactions during the preschool years increase the potential for interpersonal conflicts (Holmberg, 1980; Stollack, Scholom, Kallam, & Saturansky, 1973). Children's ability to successfully resolve these interpersonal conflicts affects the likelihood of their making and maintaining friends. Children use a variety of strategies to resolve conflict including avoidance, cooperation, force, reporting to an adult, and aggression. Many children learn these skills through observation, involvement with others, and both success and failure experiences. Successful children have a broad range of interpersonal problem solving strategies for resolving conflict and meeting their goals (Shure & Spivack, 1979, 1980; Vaughn & Ridley, 1983). They are also selective about the conditions under which they use these strategies. They have already learned, for example, that to be effective with their friend, Mike, they need to share and not grab, but it is all right to grab from Marcia. While some children acquire these skills without direct intervention, many children who are socially withdrawn or exhibit other social-emotional difficulties are at risk for failing to acquire interpersonal problem solving skills.

Interpersonal problem solving skills are an important piece of social competence (Urbain & Kendall, 1980). Children need to learn a

wide range of strategies that will enable them to be successful in a variety of situations. When children have only one way of interacting, they lack the flexibility needed to adjust successfully to novel social situations. A child may, for example, interact successfully with his or her mother, but may lack the skills to interact successfully with others. As the child's range of strategies for successfully interacting with others increases so does the likelihood for interpersonal success. Early success in interacting with others positively is important, as failure to interact effectively tends to be self-perpetuating. It sets in motion a cycle of failure resulting in participation in fewer and fewer positive interactions with others. In turn, the children's social inadequacies discourage other children from initiating interaction with them (Rubin, Daniels-Beirness, & Bream, 1984). The purpose of many interpersonal problem solving training programs is to increase the child's effectiveness in dealing successfully with others across a range of situations.

Interpersonal Problem Solving Programs

During the past 15 years investigators have developed and evaluated interpersonal problem solving programs with a variety of populations, such as distressed marital couples, schizophrenics, alcoholics, and juvenile delinquents (e.g., Bash & Camp, 1980; Coche & Glick, 1975; Intagliata, 1978; Jacobson, 1984). Spivack and Shure (1974) and their colleagues at the Hahnemann Medical Center, whose research examined the relationship between interpersonal problem solving and adjustment with young children, laid the foundation for developing interpersonal problem solving training programs with young children. Shure, Spivack, and Jaeger (1971) compared 64 Head Start children separated into two groups of "adjusted" and "aberrant" and found that children in the aberrant

group were less able to solve typical interpersonal problems than were those children in the "adjusted" group. Likewise, Shure, Newman, and Silver (1973) evaluated the interpersonal problem solving skills of 257 Head Start children and found a significant relationship between "adjustment" and ability to solve problems.

Based on this research, Spivack and Shure (1974) developed a cognitive problem solving program for young children. The program includes procedures for promoting the child's ability to: (a) be sensitive to the existence of a problem, (b) generate alternative solutions, (c) define the step-by-step means to reaching the outcome, (d) consider consequences of implementing a solution, and (e) recognize the mutual influence of the two persons in the problem situation.

Shure and Spivack (1973) evaluated the effects of this 46 lesson interpersonal problem solving program on the interpersonal problem solving ability and the adjustment of black, inner-city, impulsive preschoolers. Results indicated a significant gain by the problem solving trained group compared with the control group on both interpersonal problem solving and adjustment.

In another study, the results of a paper-pencil test and a teacher rated behavior checklist indicated that kindergarten students trained in problem solving showed gains in both problem solving and in adjustment when compared to a control group (Shure & Spivack, 1980). To further explore the relationship between problem solving and adjustment, Shure and Spivack (1978) developed a program in which mothers were trained to teach interpersonal problem solving lessons (scripts) to their young children, and also to use the same skills themselves when problems arose

with their children. Children whose mothers adopted the interpersonal problem solving skills taught in the program showed significant gains in problem solving skills and improvement in school behavior.

Sharp (1981) replicated the Spivack and Shure (1974) training program with young children. Children were divided into three groups, one of which received the Spivack and Shure interpersonal training program. The second group received the same program without the first twelve language lessons, and the third group was an attention placebo control group. Sharp's study confirmed that children can be taught to generate alternatives to problem situations but failed to find support for the relationship between interpersonal problem solving skills and adjustment. Sharp suggested a behavioral component may be needed to mediate cognitive problem solving and adjustment.

Cognitive-Behavioral Interpersonal Problem Solving

Shure and Spivack demonstrated the relationship between cognitive problem solving and adjustment; however, a child's ability to think through a problem situation does not assure that the child will act on this solution and so solve the problem. The importance of a behavioral component in interpersonal problem solving has been demonstrated (e.g., Sharp, 1981; Harrell & Geurney, 1976; Jacobson, 1978; Sharp, 1981; Van Hasselt, Hersen, Whitehill, & Bellack, 1979).

Ridley and Vaughn (1982) developed a model for teaching interpersonal problem solving skills that includes both a cognitive and a behavioral component. This model has seven components: goal identification, cue sensitivity, emapthy, alternative thinking consequential thinking, procedural thinking, and integration. These

components are separated for instructional purposes and for explanation of the program, but it is the integration of these components that produces successful interpersonal problem solving.

Goal identification. The purpose of goal identification, the first step in the problem solving process, is to teach children to identify what they want or, in the case of a problem situation, what the problem is (Vaughn & Ridley, 1983). Children who identify their goals are more likely to persist in the task until their goals are met (Meichenbaum, 1975). Further, the ability to identify the desired outcome is related to the ability to generate solutions and evaluate consequences.

Cue sensitivity. Cue sensitivity is the ability to interpret the environment accurately and to understand both verbal and nonverbal messages sent by others. As cue sensitivity develops, children learn that different people may react differently to the same stimulus: sharing a chair may work with Mary but not with John.

Empathy. Empathy is the taking on of the emotional state of another to such an extent that you not only feel as the other feels, but also exhibit the nonverbal behaviors of another. It requires two levels of responding, cognitive and affective (Freeman, 1984; Ridley, Vaughn, & Wittman, 1982; Strayer, 1980). At the cognitive level, the child identifies the feeling states in self and others. At the affective level, the child feels as the other feels. Empathy has been identified as a skill essential to developing and maintaining relationships with others across the life span (e.g., Clark, 1980; Feshbach, 1975; Guerney, 1977; Stotland, Sherman, & Shaver, 1971). Empathy is related to such positive outcomes as social understanding, moral development, sharing, helping, comforting, self-esteem, and positive interpersonal relations

(Buckley, Siegel, & Ness 1979; Feshbach, N. & Feshbach, S., 1969; Greif & Hogan, 1973; Iannotti, 1975; Marcus, Telleen, & Roke, 1979).

Ridley, Vaughn, & Wittman (1982) demonstrated the effectiveness of empathy training with preschool children. Four levels of empathic skills were taught sequentially: identifying basic emotional states; identify emotions in self; identifying emotions in others; and match in affective states. The authors evaluated the effectiveness of the program by assessing both cognitive and affective measures of change. Results indicated that students in the empathy program, when compared with students in the contact control group (story sessions), improved significantly on the affective measure of empathy.

Alternative thinking.. Alternative thinking enables the child to generate a variety of potential solutions to problem situations (Ridley & Vaughn, 1984). The goal of alternative thinking is to increase the child's range of methods for solving problems. The rationale is that an increased repertoire for handling problems is positively related to successful resolution of the problem and positive peer relationships.

Consequential thinking. Consequential thinking refers to the ability to predict consequences before implementing a solution to a problem. Children who engage in consequential thinking screen solutions before taking action and thus prepare themselves for coping with a range of potential consequences. This ability increases the likelihood children will select viable solutions.

Procedural thinking. Procedural thinking enables the child to identify and rehearse the steps for getting from the selected alternative to the desired goal. Many children are able to identify the problem, generate alternatives and evaluate the alternatives, but are

unable to imp'ement effectively the selected alternative. Procedural thinking assists the child in describing, role-playing, rehearsing, and implementing the process which has been selected to solve the problem.

Integration. Fifty interpersonal problem solving lessons and a teacher's manual combine and teach the preceding components. In initial lessons, students "assist" puppets in solving problems. After the students become familiar with this process, the puppets "assist" them in solving their own problems. In addition to teaching the interpersonal problem solving process within the framework of the lessons, the teacher takes advantage of naturally occurring problem situations throughout the day to facilitate and generalize skills acquisition.

Evaluating the Efficacy of Teaching Interpersonal Problem Solving to Young Children

The (Vaughn, Levine, & Ridley, 1986) interpersonal problem solving program was first evaluated with 40 preschool children ranging in age from 4 years, 5 months to 5 years (Ridley & Vaughn, 1982). Children were randomly assigned to the interpersonal problem solving training group or to the control group and were assessed on three measures--cognitive problem solving, behavioral problem solving, and empathy--prior to training, immediately after training, and again three months following the ten week training program. Results indicated significant differences from pretest to posttest between the experimental and control groups on both the cognitive and behavioral measures of problem solving. These significant differences remained at the three-month follow-up. There were no significant differences at posttest or follow-up on the empathy measure. This study assessed how young children could increase their range of alternatives for solving

problems with their peers. How the problem-solving training affects their behavior in a naturalistic setting was unknown.

In order to address the question regarding effects of training on behavior in a naturalistic setting, Vaughn and Ridley (1983) investigated the effect of teaching the interpersonal problem solving program on the classroom behavior of 4 and 5-year-olds. Twenty-two children were in the training group and 22 children were in a contact control group. All students were observed during both indoor and outdoor play for three days prior to training and three days following training. Results indicated students involved in the problem solving training program, relative to the contact control group, demonstrated significant increases in both positive verbal and nonverbal interactions with peers.

A study evaluating the efficacy of the interpersonal problem solving training program with aggressive young children (Vaughn, Ridley, & Bullock, 1984) indicated students involved in the program were better problem solvers immediately after training and at a three month follow-up. In another study, children involved in the interpersonal problem-solving training program demonstrated increases in problem-solving and positive perception of self (Ridley & Vaughn, 1984).

Conclusion

Interpersonal problem solving is an important aspect of social competence and training in problem solving skills appears to be a viable means of enhancing social competence with young children. Although most of the efficacy studies reviewed in this article contained a follow-up evaluation three months following posttesting, further information on the long-range effects and generalizability of acquired skills is

necessary. Questions regarding when skills are used and with whom need to be addressed. In addition, future efficacy research should explore the extent to which individual components of a program contribute to its effectiveness.

Research identifying problem situations most commonly encountered by young children is needed. Krasnor and Rubin (1983) have taken a step in this direction. They observed the social problem solving activities of preschool children and identified the three most frequent social problem solving attempts of preschool children as (1) other-action, attempting to elicit a specific active response from another, (2) stop-action, preventing or stopping another's action, and (3) object acquisition, acquiring an object from another. Further research is needed in this area to insure training programs address problems that are relevant to the young child's environment.

While research assessing the impact of interpersonal problem solving training on young children indicates interpersonal problem solving is an important piece of the social competence puzzle, these and other questions need to be addressed before the full effects of interpersonal problem solving on social competence can be untangled.

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